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Regular Screenings Important Part Of Wellness Tuneup

**By Melanie Reynolds
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If you're like me, you take your car into the service station every fall for an oil change and lube and a check of fluid levels and tire pressure. You want to keep your vehicle in good shape, so it'll carry you reliably through another Montana winter.

Shouldn't we be just as proactive about taking care of ourselves?

Like our cars, we all can benefit from routine diagnostic screenings to help prevent problems as we age. Screenings are tests that look for diseases before you have symptoms, like blood pressure checks and colonoscopies. Many preventive screenings have been recognized as a cost-effective way to identify and treat potential health problems before they develop or get worse.

Your health-care provider will probably recommend screenings that are appropriate for you—assuming you see your provider regularly. But your health is ultimately your responsibility, so it's a good idea to learn which screening tests you may need and when to get them. You'll be able to discuss them more intelligently with your doctor or nurse.

It's also important to keep up with the latest scientific thinking regarding screenings.

Recommendations change frequently as new information becomes available. For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued a new recommendation in August that all Baby Boomers (those born from 1945 through 1965) should be tested for the hepatitis C virus, which can cause serious liver damage.

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force is a national independent panel of medical experts that makes recommendations based on scientific evidence about which clinical preventive services should be included in primary medical care and for which populations.

Here are some of the screening tests the task force recommends:

For Men Only

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Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm: If you're a man between the ages of 65 and 75 and have ever been a smoker, talk to your health-care provider about this test designed to find bulging in your abdominal aorta, the largest artery in your body. If the artery bursts, it can cause dangerous bleeding and death.

Syphilis: Ask your health-care provider if you should be screened for this sexually transmitted disease.

For Women Only

Breast Cancer: Women 40 and older should have a mammogram every 1-2 years. Ask your health-care provider what schedule is right for you based on your age, family history, overall health, and personal concerns. (The Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department offers free mammograms to women who are uninsured or underinsured and who meet age and income guidelines. For more information, call us at 457-8923.)

Cervical Cancer: Women who are 21 to 65 years old and sexually active should have a Pap smear every 1-3 years. If you're over 65 and recent Pap smears were normal, or if you've had a hysterectomy for any reason other than cancer, you no longer need a Pap smear.

Chlamydia: Sexually transmitted diseases like chlamydia can make it hard to get pregnant and may affect your baby. If you're a woman 25 or younger and sexually active, you should be screened for chlamydia. If you're over 25, ask your health-care provider if the test is appropriate for you.

Hepatitis B Virus: Pregnant women should be screened for HBV at their first prenatal visit. The virus, which can affect the liver, can be passed to an infant during childbirth.

Osteoporosis: Women aged 65 and older should be screened routinely to make sure bones are strong. If you're under 65, talk to your health-care provider about whether you should be tested.

For All Adults

Colorectal Cancer: Both men and women should be screened for colorectal cancer starting at age 50. If you have a family history of colorectal cancer, you may need to be screened sooner.

Diabetes: Get screened for type 2 diabetes if your blood pressure is higher than 135/80 or if you take medicine for high blood pressure. Diabetes can cause problems with your heart, brain, eyes, feet, kidneys, nerves, and other body parts.

High Blood Pressure: Starting at age 18, have your blood pressure checked at least every 2 years. High blood pressure is 140/90 or higher. It can cause heart, kidney, and eye problems.

High Cholesterol: Starting at age 20, have your cholesterol checked regularly if you:

- use tobacco;
- are obese;
- have diabetes or high blood pressure; or
- have a personal history of heart disease or blocked arteries.

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You also should be checked if a man in your family had a heart attack before age 50 or a woman, before age 60.

Men aged 35 or older should have their cholesterol checked regularly regardless of other factors.

HIV: Talk to your health-care provider about HIV screening if you:

- have had unprotected sex with multiple partners;
- are a man who has sex with men;
- have injected drugs;
- exchange sex for money or drugs or have sex partners who do;
- have or had a sex partner who is HIV-infected, bisexual, or injects drugs;
- are being treated for a sexually transmitted disease;
- had a blood transfusion between 1978 and 1985; or
- have any other concerns.

Overweight and Obesity: The best way to learn if you're overweight or obese is to determine your body mass index (BMI). A BMI calculator is available at: www.nhlbisupport.com/bmi/.

A BMI between 18.5 and 25 indicates a normal weight. If you're obese (BMI of 30 or higher), talk to your health-care provider about getting help with losing weight. Overweight and obesity can lead to diabetes and heart disease.

If you've put off these or other health screenings your doctor recommends, remember: They're most likely less expensive and less inconvenient than the conditions they're designed to detect or prevent.

Besides, aren't you worth far more than that Toyota parked in your garage?

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